

Sun, Sand and Soap—A Story of Adventure—By H. Bedford Jones

IT WAS 3 in the afternoon and as hot as a day on the Mojave desert as ever blew out the thermometer. The westerling sun blazed down from a blue sky, as clear and hard as a crystal dome. Its rays drew the thin dry air skyward in shimmering heat. It radiated from the glistening white faces of tortured rock, from the blinding, shifting white sands.

Desert dweller though he was, "Mont" Mangas had never before been so badly off from thirst. As he stumbled along, at the head of his two burros, his lips moved almost incessantly, dry, tortured lips inclosing a swollen tongue.

Water in the rocks over there," he mumbled, squinting at the opening of a canon, a mile distant. "I saw it coming out! Yes! Water, no alkali, either."

Mangas was no weakling. To the little world of men who wandered along the edge of the desert he was a giant. He was a man of height and of stalwart build, he was regarded by the weakened desert rats as a giant. Yet now his great frame was weakening.

"It wasn't for that hole yonder. I'd think I was never intended to get out of here," he said, as he trudged. His mind was riveted on the hope that lay in the little canon ahead, among the rock waste.

"If I could strike it rich!" His words had no meaning now, but the thought was clear enough in his brain, despite the dry lips. That'd be worth this torture, to know what may turn up in these parts. Look at those paint miners down by the Salton! Look at that strontianite mine that they opened up—

THE harrowing thirst bit into him anew. The wind blew in through San Geronimo Pass and spread out across the sand wastes. Dust devils played here and there. Little whirlwinds that sent spirals of sand spinning. One of these passed across the main in front of Mangas; it raised a fog of choking sand, out of which the young prospector stumbled, coughing and choking.

Presently his steps became faster. The burros, too, recognized the spot and tried to shove past the man. He prodded them in the ribs, hurled himself forward, spent his last reserve of energy in a spurt that took him to the jumble of black lava and granite outcroppings. There, in a little niche, was the water hole, but it was dry.

Mangas stood staring, incredulous and desperate. Then the shoving burros roused him into action. He beat them back and exhaled the water hole again. He perceived now that some one had been before him, not so very long before, either.

He dropped to his knees, buried his face in the shallow basin, scooping at the sand and powdered rock with his fingers. Was there any water at all? None showed. He brought forth his red bandana handkerchief and stirred it down in the sand. It showed one or two moist spots.

Frenziedly the man fell to work. Again and again he shoved down the handkerchief, plunging it as deep into the sand as he could get it. At last he found enough water in it to wring a drop or two on his tongue. Over and over he did this, but he soon realized that it would give him no permanent relief. If he camped here until next day he might get some water—but—

His eye, used to the dry, white monotony of the desert, was caught by a moving speck. He straightened up, staring, letting burros nose the ground unheeded. He should have seen the speck before this, would have done so but for his thirst frenzy. Now he saw the trail going away from the water hole, a man and a single burro.

"Come on, Dynamite!" He jerked at the leading burro. "Hell camp in the foothills over beyond; we'll get there, all right, after him. We can't get out of this canyon, any how!" He filled his bottle here, "one drink, Dynamite!" He prodded the burros into activity and set forth along the trail.

Those few drops of water had helped him vastly, had helped restore his flagging interest. Now, as he emerged again from the canon opening, he carefully eyed the speck in the distance, saw that it was heading up another canon. For this Mangas headed in a bee line, disregarding the trail entirely. The speck disappeared, but he had his bearings.

On he trudged the man and the two burros. Mangas was in a new valley, a part of the desert which he had not previously visited, although he had crossed this on his trip out from civilization. What lay ahead of him he could not tell. There were no doves whistling in the air, no water. He had simply the spoor of the unknown man for hope.

That canon was not so far distant, after all; the westerling sunlight had deceived his eyes. Now the stars were beginning to shine more clearly, as Mangas headed into the unknown canon on the trail of the unknown. He looked ahead for a camp fire, but perceived none.

MANGAS came to an abrupt halt, peering through the starlit darkness ahead. Then his inflamed eyes touched upon a dark blue. Again he pressed forward; ahead of him, pulled away by a burrowing burro. Where was the man, then?

Hurrying on, despair spurring him, Mangas came close to the burro. Again he halted, staring at the animal; now, however, with incredulous amazement and anger stirring in his heart. He recognized that burro with the peculiar white streak, which he had known the brute anywhere. "Luck's against me," he thought, peering around for the man. "It's Crater Heller! Of all men! He'd sooner shoot me on sight than give me a drink!"

Suddenly, as Mangas stood there, a sound came to him from above. He raised his head, perched among the rocks on the hillside, a hundred feet away, was the dark shape of a cabin. What was it? Who lived here? Not Heller, certainly.

Abandoning his burros Mangas turned and mounted the hillside. He loosened the gun at his hip, his ears alert for the warning of rattlers. No sound came to him, either from the rocks or from the dim outline of the cabin above. Then, as he watched, he saw a small square of light break out in the cabin outline, a window.

Heller was there, then, and had lit a lamp. Mangas approached the place cautiously. What he was about to find here he did not know, but he knew Heller. If he was to get a drink from that man he must fight for it. And Mangas was too far gone, too utterly desperate, to hesitate.

THE light in the window drew him irresistibly. He approached without sound; it was a singular thing to find a cabin here, and it was more singular to find Heller at this cabin. As he came close, but not too close, he doffed his hat and raised his eyes to a level with the small pane of glass. He caught his breath quickly; his eyes, dilated with startled anger, were riveted upon the scene within the cabin. A moment he stood motionless, then his hand slipped swiftly to the holster and slid forth his revolver.

Even yet he waited; then, with a low growl of anger, he smashed the muzzle of the weapon through the glass. The crash of the glass was followed by an oath from within.

"Hands up!" said Mangas. His words were almost unintelligible, but his gun and the eyes over it spoke his message even better. Painfully he spoke again, spoke words that came clearer. "Take his gun. I'll come inside."

An instant later he left the window and hurried around the corner of the shack to where the door was located. Mangas pushed this open and stepped over the threshold. At his appearance the bearded Heller dropped an oath of rage and consternation. He was not a handsome individual, this Heller.

His round moon face scowled in angry recognition of Mangas; his black whiskers seemed to bristle; his beady, shifty eyes showed nothing but a baffled fury.

MANGAS sank upon a stool beside the center table of the place, his gun hand resting on the table, the weapon covering Heller. He shot a quick glance at a bunk against the rear wall of the cabin. Stretched out on this bunk was a young man, pale and haggard, the marks of long illness on his wan features. Near him, standing in panting defiance, stood a girl; in her hand was the pistol taken from Heller.

"Water!" The head of Mangas lunged forward; he recovered himself desperately. The word came from his lips like a groan.

None the less the girl recognized the word, and with light step, she darted across the room. She drew a dipper of water from an olla on a bench near the door and brought this to Mangas. He raised the cup greedily; in his madness he would have smothered it, had not his tongue been so swollen, his throat so nearly closed. As it was only a few drops would trickle down.

He set down the cup, not lifting his eyes from Heller, who stood with arms in air. Mangas tried to speak, but he found his tongue tied. He issued from his throat. He motioned to the girl. Admiration leaped into his eyes at her quick wit, for she swiftly had pencil and paper before him.

"Get your money," he wrote, "and see that he is unharmed."

The girl looked over his shoulder and read the words. For a moment she hesitated, as she looked up at Heller, then she stepped forward. Mangas watched with eagle eyes, while from the desert rat's pocket she took a roll of bills. Mangas had, as he looked through the window, seen Heller take this money from beneath the pillow of the sick man, after a slight scuffle with the girl.

Heller proved to be unarmed, except for the gun which had already been taken from him. As the girl stepped back, Mangas rose to his feet and motioned to the door. Heller in the deadly, venomous silence which he had maintained from the beginning, obeyed the gesture.

Mangas followed him, stood in the doorway a moment, saw that the desert rat was descending the hill with a rumble of oaths in his wake. Then, turning, Mangas shut the door and slipped the bolt. As he did so he staggered and reached for a chair, then the room swam around before his eyes. He plunged down heavily.

It was daylight when Mangas came back. Heller opened his eyes, stared around and remembered everything. He lay in one corner of the room, upon a pile of blankets; his own blankets. Near him was all his own outfit, carefully piled up and neatly arranged. He understood at once that the girl must have done this. A girl, handling Dynamite and Parader! He would have liked to see how she did it. At the thought he uttered a short laugh.

"Feeling better, are you?" queried a voice.

Mangas raised himself and saw that the invalid had spoken. He smiled back at the young man and then, as he crossed his sturdy chin, "Some thanks," he responded. "Only I sure need a shave! Hadn't figured on striking women folks this way."

The other chuckled in response. Then came sudden interruption. "Able to talk? That's fine!" The girl stood framed in the doorway, smiling at Mangas. She was good to look upon, her face radiating cheerfulness; brown eyes matched her braided hair; good, level, honest eyes.

LOOKS-like you've given me considerable attention," said Mangas.

"I guess you can't see me as long as I can't see you," said Mangas. "I've never been right in this valley before, but I've been all around here. If there's any advice I can give you, you're sure welcome to it!"

The girl produced for his inspection a map which was so crudely drawn as to be unintelligible, unless the locality to which it referred, was already known. Mangas chuckled as he bent over it, straightening out the paper. "I'm such a poor hand locating gold," he said whimsically. "That may be I can locate modeling clay! Let's see what we can make out of this."

The map showed what was called "Lost Horse Claim," located on the south slope of a sizable canon. A pictured tunnel in the side of the claim showed that it had been worked. At a fork of the canon, just above the claim, was drawn an Indian camp and a water hole. Not far from this were drawn two palms, sprouting from a single stem.

"Why, that's queer!" Mangas put his finger on the pictured trees and glanced up.

"You know the place?" queried the girl eagerly.

"Hm! Expect I do, if it's the same place. About four hours' travel south of here there used to be a water hole. It's been dry for years, they tell me. As a water hole it's only a legend and a memory. The point is, however, that there used to be two palms there, coming up from the same root, like this shows on the map. The place used to be called 'Las Palmas Hermanas,' or 'The Palm Sisters.'"

An exclamation broke from Bob Linder. His sister, an excited flush in her cheeks, leaned forward and seized the map. She turned it over. Upon the reverse side Mangas saw scribbled the words, "Las Palmas Hermanas."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he ejaculated and broke into a delighted laugh.

"No trail west nowadays by the way the water had vanished years ago, and for a time Mangas was not at all certain that he had found the right place. When they reached the fork of the canon, however, they found that this was beyond question the spot pictured in the map. The sister palms had vanished utterly, and all sign of a water hole had departed, yet there was no mistaking the place.

"But where's the claim, where's the tunnel that's on the map?" asked Beth, staring helplessly around at the waste of rock and sand and cactus.

"Gone the same way of the two palm trees, most likely," said Mangas. "However, we know about where it should be. Do you know the kind of ore or clay you're after, the color of it? I mean?"

"No. I have an impression it was yellow, but I can't be certain."

By reference to the map Mangas at length located what he thought might be the cave-in tunnel; there was little to prove the fact, however, amid the waste of rock and sand on the hillside. He now gave his attention to rigging up a shelter for the girl, by the aid of a blanket, a Joshua tree and a couple of sticks.

"I'll have to look around for a bit," he explained. "We'll stop here for most of the day, so there's no rush; and you must keep out of the sun as much as possible. In another hour it'll be a hundred and twenty in this canon."

"But you can't work in such heat!" exclaimed Beth. Mangas laughed.

"I don't aim to do much work, just look around a bit. And I'm used to it. By the way, did our friend Heller have any idea that the map referred to Las Palmas Hermanas?"

Beth frowned slightly. "Not until the other night. He was trying to get the man away from me, when you came. It was with the roll of money, and he had started to examine it when you interfered."

Mangas dismissed the matter carelessly. In fact he was not a whit worried over Heller, whom he knew to be a smart fellow. Since this mine could turn out nothing except fire clay, at best, it would not afford it a very fruitful subject for dispute.

Pick in hand Mangas worked his way up the hillside, testing out the ledges and various points of contact. As he worked higher up the side of the canon, he got away from the talus he found less sand and more rock. Then, unexpectedly, he came upon a freshly dug hole among some boulders. It opened up what was undoubtedly a yellowish clay formation, under a foot of soil.

Stopping, Mangas was so startled that he almost fell. "That's a gold mine, now!" "Can you take us there?" asked the girl eagerly.

Mangas hesitated. Bob Linder divined the cause and spoke up. "Leave me out of it. I couldn't take any four-hour trip and back! You go and look over the place in the morning, sis, if Mont will take you. I'll be mighty proud to serve as guide!"

"Sure ought to," said Mangas. "I was in mighty poor health myself a year ago, just a city kid, with no prospect of being anything else. I had some money saved up, and one day I lit out. I met up with an old prospector over in Palmdale, on the railroad, and he taught me the ropes. Haven't found any gold mine yet, but living is cheap and I located some fair silver prospects a month ago. These will bring me in something eventually. Well, this feast certainly looks good, Miss Linder."

"No ceremony, please. It's Bob and Beth and Mont around here," said the girl, smiling. "We ought to be in the coffee."

Make-shift seats were drawn up, and the three attacked breakfast. It was then that Beth Linder made a statement that caused Mangas to swallow hard. "When Bob's able to take tips, he'll be able to do some prospecting, too," she said.

Mangas gulped. "You prospect?" he asked. With the rigors of desert prospecting in mind, its hardships and dangers, it was small wonder that he stared.

"Beth thinks that she can tackle anything," said Bob Linder, chuckling. "Yet there was a vast admiration in his voice, a worshipful light in his eyes; and Mangas liked him the better."

"Our plans for prospecting are different," remarked the girl.

AS she spoke she shot a glance at her brother. Between them passed something that Mangas did not understand. A question lay in the eyes of Beth, and the invalid assented to it with a nod. Then the girl turned to Mangas.

"We want to make our stay here serve a double purpose," she said quietly. "Years ago our father spent a good deal of time here on the edge of the desert, painting and modeling. He learned from an old Indian that somewhere near here there was a clay rock which, ground to powder, made a finer modeling clay than any known. From specimens of pottery which he got from the Indian we know that this was so."

"And you hope to find that rock?" asked Mangas.

"Yes. Our father left a map where he got it. I don't know, but I think some one made it for him from the Indian's description. We can't make much of it, and we've been wishing that we knew some one whom we could trust, some one to give us advice. Bob thinks that we can trust you. After what 'passed' last night—"

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